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Brazilian Court Convicts Sao Paulo Mayor of Corruption

by LADB Staff

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Celso Pitta, mayor of Sao Paulo, was convicted on Dec. 22 of involvement in a multimillion dollar corruption scandal. Pitta said that he will appeal. If his appeal effort fails, he stands to lose his political rights for eight years. He can, however, stay in office until the Tribunal de Justicia hears the appeal early in 1998. Meanwhile, members of the city council have called for his removal on other charges. Pitta was convicted of participating in a fraudulent municipal-bond scheme between September 1994 and April 1996.

Judge Pedro Aurelio Pires Maringolo found that Pitta, while city finance secretary during the administration of former mayor Paulo Maluf, carried out "ruinous operations" related to issuing illegal public bonds (see NotiSur, 03/07/97). Maluf, a likely candidate for the presidency in the next general elections, is Pitta's political godfather. Pitta was ordered to pay a US\$29 million fine as partial repayment for the monetary damages the scheme caused the city. Also convicted were the former coordinator of the Public Debt Department of Sao Paulo, Wagner Ramos, and 15 financial institutions.

Judge Pires Maringolo said Pitta's conduct "showed that he lacks the personal honesty necessary to hold any public office, especially the office of mayor of the capital of the state of Sao Paulo." It is unclear where all the money went, but the judge said that "it is assumed that some went toward Pitta's political campaign, and more can probably be found in some fiscal paradise or in US bank accounts."

On Jan. 7, Pitta suffered another political blow when several city council members called for his removal from office for failing to comply with a law requiring 30% of tax revenues to go to education. Pitta has refused to allocate the funds, saying that education does not need that much money. The council members called for the state of Sao Paulo to intervene in the city affairs. While the Sao Paulo city charter provides legal mechanisms to remove a mayor, this is the first time it has been used. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 12/22/97; Notimex, 01/07/98)

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